

Article published May 30, 2005 *Gainesville Sun*

Former POW, author shares his survival tale

In the middle of a room of wounded and disabled military veterans in the center of a veterans hospital, Joseph Banks offered his appreciation Sunday afternoon.

"I salute you and I am grateful to you," Banks told the veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam who were able to gather in the auditorium of the Veterans Administration Medical Center.

Then he told them his story, the reason why he was asked to be the keynote speaker today during a community-wide Memorial Day ceremony at Lake City Community College - the reason why other Americans may want to salute him to express their gratitude.

Banks was a B-17 flight engineer on his second-to-last World War II bombing mission before he would qualify to return home to his wife and 1-year-old son. During the mission over Germany, the plane flying in formation above hit Banks' plane and both exploded in midair. Banks was the only survivor of his crew. He barely survived his captivity as a prisoner of war.

When he was discharged, Banks was awarded two Distinguished Flying Crosses, the highest honor awarded by the Army Air Force.

By the time he was able to return to the United States, all he wanted to do was to forget those horrific experiences and focus on his family, which would grow to include two daughters as well as the son who had been born while he was overseas. His family respected his wishes for several decades until one of his daughters persuaded him to put his experiences into writing, a project that became the book "A Distant Prayer."

Since writing his book, Banks has become known as a patriotic and prayerful motivational speaker. On Sunday, members of Vet Power of America and Third Judicial Circuit Court Judge Vernon Douglas accompanied Banks as he visited veterans at the medical center who may not be able to attend today's ceremony on the east side of Lake City.

"We're (Americans) not perfect," Banks said. "There are a lot of problems here, but if we continue to pray and be good citizens, it will change."

Among those able to visit with Banks on Sunday were several veterans who said they appreciated being recognized during Memorial Day observances.

"I grew up in a small town on Long Island (New York) where we had a parade every year and it started with an opera singer who sang the Star-Spangled Banner," recalled Rick Rohn, a Vietnam-era Navy veteran. "But while I was in the service, it was like Memorial Day events were on suspension. Memorial Day was unheard of overseas; I am glad they have it here."

Today's ceremony will begin at 6 p.m. in the Alfonso Levy Performing Arts Center at Lake City Community College. Also featured will be a musical presentation by Miss North Florida 2005, Kylie Williams.

Karen Voyles can be reached at (352) 486-5058 or voylesk@gvillesun.com